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## Unruly Entrepreneurs: Russian Worker Responses to Insecure Formal Employment

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The article adds to research on in-work poverty, 'precarious' work and informal economic activity. It provides ethnographic data on mobility between formal and informal work in Russia; industrial 'normative' employment is seen as precarious due to on-the-job insecurity (Standing 2011). Insecurity is understood through the prism of low-wages, lack of control over work processes, but above all the imperative on workers to become flexible, self-regulating subjects of the reformed neoliberal Russia. The discourse of self-governmentality is contrasted by informants to interpretations of more benign production regimes under socialism (Burawoy 1992). Exit strategies from, and discourses of resistance to, the new strictures of waged employment are then examined. These are sustained by access to an embedded blue-collar identity, and the social networks that support and reinforce such ties.

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governmentality, informal economy, precarity, Russia, shop-floor culture

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*Jeremy Morris, University of Birmingham, UK*

## **ABSTRACT**

The article adds to research on in-work poverty, 'precarious' work and informal economic activity. It provides ethnographic data on mobility between formal and informal work in Russia; industrial 'normative' employment is seen as precarious due to on-the-job insecurity (Standing 2011). Insecurity is understood through the prism of low-wages, lack of control over work processes, but above all the imperative on workers to become flexible, self-regulating subjects of the reformed neoliberal Russia. The discourse of self-governmentality is contrasted by informants to interpretations of more benign production regimes under socialism (Burawoy 1992). Exit strategies from, and discourses of resistance to, the new strictures of waged employment are then examined. These are sustained by access to an embedded blue-collar identity, and the social networks that support and reinforce such ties.

## **KEYWORDS**

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Driving through the industrial zone on the main road into Izluchino, a small town three-hours from Moscow, the most visible sign of work is not the cement mixing plant or linoleum rolling mill of the surviving post-Soviet enterprises, but the informal economy, by some accounts contributing nearly half Russia's GDP (Andrews et al 2011): swarms of gypsy cabs, utility vehicles of self-employed (and unregistered) construction workers making their way to and from the mushrooming private developments, and the impoverished sellers of seasonal produce at the side of the road. There are five taxi outfits in Izluchino; at peak times there around twenty taxis parked up in the dusty and potholed unpaved central 'square' – their drivers are all men, young and old, who have more or less given up on formal work. The chances of winning more than a local, one-dollar-fare equivalent, per hour are slim; most people travelling further afield use the hourly bus service to the *oblast* capital. In any case each driver has to pay a hefty fee to the dispatchers in order to work, not to mention buying their own radio set and 'checkers' roof-sign. So why would someone give up even poorly paid permanent work in manufacturing or processing plants for such an uncertain, indeed *precarious* existence? Sasha, a skilled forklift driver, had frequently switched between formal employment to own-account work as a

gypsy cab-driver. By 2010 he had enough of the cement factory, where he had been working for the last 18 months:

'I'll go back to taxidiving. "Stuff the job" - that's what I said to the supervisor. I was one of the best shift workers there, but they never leave you alone. It's like they can't bear to see you not busy, even if you've stacked your batch in half the time it took the other team'.

Sasha explained how, despite fulfilling his side of the 'bargain': working skilfully and quickly without supervision, managers at the plant were not satisfied, giving extra duties once he had completed primary tasks. Sasha had a socialist-era understanding of the moral economy of production and refused to become a 'reflexive' worker; the 'price' he paid was increasing recourse to informal work.

Other factors that made the permanent job 'not worth it' were uncertainty about benefits: sometimes requests for time off were denied when shifts were stretched, other times workers encountered enforced furlough during slack seasons; a more generalised resistance to defer to intermediate supervisors whose roles were perceived as little more than spying and 'snitching' on workers; and finally, the factory jobs' 'abysmally low level of wages' (Morrison 2008: 149) which, while meeting escalating energy and food bills, offer little chance for savings and long-term household security and reproduction. The prioritisation of such factors as contributing to formal work as precarious varied, but nonetheless a key articulation clearly emerged: low pay and a lack of a social wage (benefits and entitlements that were taken for granted in the socialist era). A significant secondary consideration was the interpretation of over-individualised supervision at work coupled with a loss of shop-floor autonomy. Finally, the existence of a dense social network that was a product of scarcity under during the Soviet period and which is now playing a major role in facilitating informal work in the post-Soviet period. While workers cannot organise to resist poor shop-floor work-relations, they are still able to access a broad range of contacts to facilitate temporary or permanent 'flight' into the informal economy. The shift in workplace control under neoliberal production regimes is the locus of discontent among workers; while this may not be generalisable throughout blue-collar employment, the ethnographic materials presented show that resistance to governmentality and a perceived loss of 'dignity' in labour are also pertinent to understandings of precarity as is inadequate remuneration, and reflect diverse and generalised understandings of precarity today. Clarke (2007) has argued that the subordination of production to the law of value means line managers have fundamentally changed from being representatives of collectives (the traditional Soviet role) to agents of management, a process this research shows is well under way even in economically and spatially marginal places.

Scholarship on insecure or precarious work in industrialised countries often describes non-standard or contingent employment practices and contracts. Thus precarious work is defined in a number of ways, but always in counter-distinction to a normative conceptualisation of a stable, full-time job with a single employer. This model presupposes a worker in secure standard employment has access to benefits and entitlements, work security and representation, and can expect to be employed long-term (Kalleberg 2009, Standing 1999, Vosko et al. 2003). While not seeking to redefine the term 'precarity', this

article shows how manual industrial workers like Sasha interpret formal, permanent employment as just as insecure as informal work. In post-socialist Europe, the focus of recent research has been on in-work poverty leading to the necessity of portfolio employment in a variety of formal and informal jobs (Stenning et al. 2010: 90-101; see also Williams and Round 2007). The present research extends this analysis to examine precarity among the working poor, not only in terms of income security – although undeniably real incomes in Russia have not kept pace with inflation in the last 20 years. Attention is also paid to *job* (as opposed to *employment*-) insecurity (Standing 2011): a lack of control over work processes and over-individualised work relations are the main factors perceived as making work precarious, even for those permanently employed. This, in the well documented absence of any organised labour response to working-class pauperisation (Crowley 2001), and the loss of enterprises' social assets available to workers in the socialist period, contributes to the explanations for permanent and temporary exit from formal work. While previous research has found the opposite tendency to that explored here: workers seeing low-paid formal sector as safer because of the problem of employer authoritarianism in the informal sector (Yaroshenko *et al* 2006), the current research shows the dynamic nature of the transformation of the Russian economy, especially in western Russia, where proximity to the capital Moscow means that labour is always in demand. Like much anthropological research, the process of ethnography itself is generative of analytical categories. Thus the research question 'why do normative workers often seek exit from the formal economy?' arises inductively out of the grounded approach of the fieldwork itself (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Workers' responses to job insecurity must also be viewed through the lens of a 'moral order' (Burawoy 1992: 102) of shop-floor industrial relations that acknowledges the primacy of labour. This interpretive position of workers towards work persists after socialism and can be seen as a mnemonic resource which is drawn on to judge the present (Straugh 2007). Burawoy convincingly argued that production under socialism necessitated a significant degree of labour autonomy on the shop-floor; due to the shortage economy and other factors, workers engaged in self-organisation (*ibid*: 108), and were active, flexible solvers of production problems. Self-esteem, dignity-in-labour, the social value of work in people's lives (Alashev 1995), and mutual recognition as agents of production were all psycho-social benefits that accrued under this regime. Disillusionment and the search for alternatives to waged work are observed when production processes that involved a degree of adaptive, reciprocal 'lateral cooperation' (*ibid*: 100-1) fall away and are replaced by technical and managerial imperatives contradictorily stressing both closer supervision and self-discipline.<sup>1</sup> In recent sociologies of production, recourse to Foucauldian theories of governmentality (Miller and Rose 1990, Larner 2000) has been useful in drawing attention to the degree in which workers of all kinds are hailed as self-regulating subjects – induced to 'work upon themselves' to become ever more flexible to the demands of post-Fordism (Atkinson 2010). However, this ethnography shows how socially-embedded labour is able to resist hegemonic discourses of flexible subordination of self in formal work. At the same time labour draws on lay conceptions of entrepreneurialism in order to mitigate against formal job insecurity. This is predicated on a shared social identity – a blue-collar network of solidarity – rather than 'individualisation' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Atkinson 2010: 414). For example, 'shame' in exit from formal work is ineffective as a technology of

governmentality (Bjerg and Staunæs 2011) due to informants access a social network in which a critical discourse on industrial employment is sustained.

The focus in this research then is on highlighting the social, historical and spatial particularity of insecurity and responses to it. The significance of (on-the-)job insecurity, in addition to employment or income insecurity is in contrast to the focus on casualisation and part-time employment in research on insecure work in other developed countries<sup>2</sup> (see Rodgers 1989: 2-4, Standing 1999 and 2009, Thornley, et al. 2010, Vosko 2006). This approach can be usefully compared to other workplace studies on 'entrepreneurship' among people with the little socio-economic capital, such as Macdonald's research on informal work among benefit claimants in the north of England (1994). Similarly, Russian informants successfully access class-based resources through peer recognition of experience, self-presentation as a skilled worker (ibid), but above all thanks to membership of a socially narrow (Smith 2010), or horizontal (Burawoy 2001: 1113, Dunn 2004), network. Unsurprisingly this is both the strength and a weakness of blue-collar workers management of insecurity: the resources that provide alternatives to waged labour cannot unbind the class-rooted limitations of those alternatives. In addition, with my focus on shop-floor culture: the network of ties, loyalties, and norms workers develop, I enact a dialogue with past studies of socialist and post-socialist work places and workers (in particular Burawoy 1992). Indeed it is Burawoy who recently restated the urgent need to look at the actually lived experience of alternative capitalisms when so many analyses of such societies 'exclude subordinate classes, which in effect become the bewildered – silent and silenced – spectators of transformations that engulf them' (2001: 1107).

Thus, following in the steps of studies of the particular shop-floor cultures and worker-enterprise relations of socialism (Burawoy 1992) and post-socialism (Ashwin 1999, Dunn 2004, Morrison 2008) this article uses the case study of Russian blue-collar workers to show how despite their insecure position, the working poor do make use of identities, performances and memory to manage the insecurity of formal work. This is not to say that these informants working in the cement works, linoleum factories and lime kilns of provincial Russia represent a 'solidaristic labour community' (Standing 2011). On the contrary, formally labour, with a few exceptions (e.g. see Ilyin 2006) remains atomized in Russia and civil society feeble. However, workers seeking temporary and permanent exit strategies from precarious employment make the most of place- and class-embedded social networks of support: values of 'reciprocity and fraternity', that Standing argues belong to an occupational community, and that the precariat lack. This article recognises the useful differentiation of aspects of precarity that Standing's theorisation makes, but seeks to broaden out the view of insecure work that mainly focuses on the rise of temporary and contingent work in the global north and which brackets off of the traditional (blue-collar) working class as somehow peripheral to the processes of globalisation and neoliberalism at the root of precarious work (ibid).

### *Ethnographic Methods and the Social Geography of the 'Company Town'*

Research materials were gathered in the Kaluga region of European Russia over three extended periods, totalling 6 months of ethnographic fieldwork, between November 2009 and December 2010. The main tools were participant and non-participant

observation and semi-structured interviews. Around 20 workers who discussed moving from formal to informal work comprise the core of informants for this ethnography. They were drawn from a variety of enterprises; all were engaged in shop-floor manual work. Examples of such labour include meat packaging and processing, welding of prefabricated components and structures for the construction industry, manufacture of specialist industrial filters, assembly of domestic-use PVC windows and home improvement products, repair and maintenance of piped hot-water systems (at both settlement and household scale), cement mixing and maintenance of construction vehicles. Living within and participating in three different worker households I was able to witness the relevance of the ever present network of extended family, friends and other social resources that people rely on in gaining work both within and outside the formal economy. In addition, I visited most informants' places of work, and in some cases was able to spend time on the shop floor working and observing. In addition, a small number of interviews were conducted with local business owners, some of whom were employers of the key informants.

From the twenty core informant and participants in the research, the present article brings into sharp focus four work-life trajectories that are as far as possible representative of the possible tensions and negotiations of formal-to-informal work in the field site that the researcher encountered. As an example of ethnography, this research aims more towards interpretive validity than representative generalisability, but nonetheless, the limited paths trodden by the Russian manual worker post 1991 are all too apparent and allow for a tentative claim for this research's wider relevance.

All four of the case studies selected are men and the research presented is male-centric. Female informants were important in gaining a rounded picture of household strategies in general and, crucially, where it was possible to interview them separately, a further perspective on the male interpretations of work. A comparison of male to female attitudes towards subordination at work is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is worth mentioning that women encountered in this research were more able, and perhaps willing to respond compliantly to the newly reflexive demands of work. Tentatively then I support existing research which suggests that men and women have responded differently to economic restructuring (see Ashwin 2006). Three of the four key informants have partners and dependent children. Given the tradition of a male breadwinner in Russia, the hurdles to giving up a 'stable' job are significant. The research shows that married men can pursue this escape route without censure.

The field site encompasses a district (*raion*) containing two small towns (populations 15000 and 20000) about 30km from the region (*oblast*) capital. During the Soviet period both towns were dominated by single employers. The smaller town, which I call Izluchino<sup>3</sup>, the focus of the present research, was a 'company town' – built from scratch in the post-war period around local extractive industries and manufacturing. 'Company town' translates the Russian term 'town-formative enterprise'; in practice this was a single, extensive, industrial enterprise responsible for building the housing and other social infrastructure throughout the town and industrial zones. The enterprise provided the vast majority of the relatively well-paid blue-collar work in the town as well as work-benefits such as canteens, transport and leisure facilities to the chiefly male workers and their dependents.<sup>4</sup> Like most company towns, Izluchino exerted a strong pull-effect on labour from neighbouring districts and regions, partly because employment guaranteed rapid



access to company-provided housing (in the 1980s some workers were allocated permanent housing in five-storey apartment blocks within six months of arrival). In the 1990s most of these flats became the private property of the occupier, providing both a significant disincentive to labour mobility despite the economically parlous situation in the district, but also a sense of security, in that periods of unemployment were 'survivable'.

The 'company town district' has been identified as one of a small number of types of urban neighbourhood in the USSR (Lehmann and Ruble 1997). The social character of such a locality was and remains overwhelmingly blue-collar to this day. Despite the splitting up in the mid 1990s of the main Izluchino Construction-Machine Plant enterprise – which built earth-moving equipment for the defence ministry – into much smaller privatised companies, resulting in the loss of over 50 percent of Soviet-era blue-collar jobs, there are still a few significant (c.1000 workers) factory- or shop-floor-based enterprises, as well as specialist shops which employ from 10 to 100 workers. The fact that Izluchino contained extractive and processing industry, as well as manufacturing, meant that its employment was, by Soviet standards, diversified, and this had an ameliorating effect on decline after 1991.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the variety of industrial-related forms of work encountered in the site can be interpreted as the legacy of Soviet enterprises' 'high levels of autarky at the level of the plant' (Gentile and Sjöberg 2006: 714). Because the company town was a geographically isolated and bureaucratically discrete unit of production operating within an economy typified by shortages it created for itself a very significant web of support and maintenance micro-operations (e.g. vehicle repair shops) designed to support core activities. This has been called a 'do-it-yourself approach' (Winiecki 1989, in Gentile and Sjöberg 2006: 714) with many jobs in peripheral activities. While the core enterprise no longer pulls workers from outside the district, and struggles to attract skilled workers due to low wages, the industrial zone contains a hinterland of inheritor businesses of the autarky type, now disaggregated from the main firm and fending for themselves. The existence of this diverse hinterland, alongside the relatively compressed public and social geography of the town, is crucial to understanding the existence of ready-made social network resources for informants in their exits from formal labour. Despite the demise of the single industrial employer, blue-collar work continues everywhere, along with the building of personal networks predicated on social and occupational positioning. Most blue-collar work pays only about \$500 a month and even well-qualified professionals earn from \$1000 a month, while living costs like food, heating and transport, are comparable to much of western Europe.<sup>6</sup> Many people regularly spend over half their wages on basic foodstuffs; the declining purchasing power of workers is well documented as a key issue in industrial relations literature on Russia (Morrison 2008: 143) and in-work poverty is characteristic of the whole post socialist space (Stenning et al. 2010). The income value of informal work is highly varied. Some work, like taxi-driving, allows autonomy but pays substantially less than formal work (perhaps only 60 percent of a manufacturing wage). Other work like skilled moonlighting as a plumber or electrician can provide double a monthly wage in a matter of days (although the frequency of such work depends on luck and the extent of the worker's contacts and network). Some younger workers commute to Moscow, 3 hours by bus to the north, or live on site there.<sup>7</sup> There are very few other work opportunities for men in the formal economy – the service and retail sectors continue to be seen as 'women's work',<sup>8</sup> agricultural jobs are

scarce and poorly paid. In the local informal economy there are opportunities doing manual work in small-scale manufacturing (avoiding tax registration both for enterprise and worker), domestic construction and associated trades (e.g. plumbing) as well as the taxi-driving and other 'un-skilled' work mentioned at the beginning of this article.

### *Interpreting Formal-employment Precarity: Individual Case Histories*

#### FORMAL TO INFORMAL WORKER MOVEMENT: FOUR CASE HISTORIES

Research materials from a number of 'case histories' like key informant Sasha, can illustrate the multi-faced understanding and reaction to precarity in formal employment. Short working histories are presented of two informants who had left formal employment, one intermediate stage informant, partially dependent on formal employment, and a final informant remaining in formal employment but planning to leave, having built up an income stream of own-account informal work. These cases are not meant to be 'representative' of blue-collar workers as a whole, but are nonetheless a summative selection of the range of entrepreneurial responses to in-work insecurity in the fieldsite studied.

Key informant Volodia (44) had, like Sasha, done a three-year stint at the cement works when he had been in his early thirties. Prior to that he had been in permanent employment since leaving secondary education with the main Soviet-era enterprise. From the cement-works he had gone to a smaller plastic fabricating plant. Then he returned to the cement works for less than a year, before taking on a variety of irregular 'jobs' in the informal economy, as a night watchman for a parking lot, taxi-driving, and own-account car repair – mainly welding. In addition, self-provisioning on his one-acre family plot a few kilometres from town plays an important role, not in the household economy itself, but as a space that facilitates both informal work (he repairs cars in a garage there) but also the necessary social interaction with his extended social network in contrast to the more private space of his cramped town flat. At the plot he regularly entertains acquaintances in his small wooden house and Russian sauna.

Key informant Dmitry (29) had begun working at one of the automobile plants in Kaluga at the beginning of my second field trip. But within a few months he had left the job and worked as a taxi-driver for six months. Prior to the automotive assembly plant job he had had a similar pattern of jobs to Volodia. After a further period of unemployment he worked in a number of seasonal and fixed-period informal trades – local construction, loading and unloading goods for local businesses, delivery driving, long-distance taxi-driving. Having spent time working in a number of local jobs, both informally and formally, Dmitry had built up a very extensive social network that was instrumental in giving him a steady supply of one-off cash jobs. He had sold his family plot to buy an expensive multi-purpose vehicle to facilitate his own-account work.

Key informant Viktor (26) had partially withdrawn from the formal economy. He had done manual work for the local administrative authority for very low pay for a number of years. This had been interspersed by well-paid informal work in construction in Moscow and the locality. He finally gave up his formal employment after failing to secure compensatory benefits as a low-paid state-employed worker. After a period of unemployment he found lucrative seasonal work (7-9 months a year) in a small

unregistered shop-floor assembling PVC windows. In the remaining months of the year he either remained unemployed, sought work from one of his previous formal employers, or did small odd-jobs for cash. A younger unmarried man, Victor had a very wide and diverse social network which he successfully utilised to find informal work.

Key informant Georgii (35) is perhaps the only 'representative' informant of a broader social category: the skilled 'moonlighter' with both formal and informal incomes. His remaining in permanent formal work while deriving significant extra income from informal labour is the most commonly encountered experience of the diverse economy in Russia (Williams and Round 2007: 2331). He drew a modest wage from specialised fabricating work in the plastic plant. A significant amount of time (some evenings and many weekends) was spent installing domestic heating and plumbing systems, an example of both 'for profit' self-employment for network-introduced clients (*ibid*), and paid favours within the extended social network itself (for example, a neighbour of Georgii's mother-in-law). The unsociable and fatiguing nature of the informal work, and its very considerable financial risks and benefits (a single 'job' of 2-3 days can provide 200 percent of monthly take-home pay) meant that at the end of the fieldwork (December 2010), Georgii reported that he was considering leaving his formal employment, although the unusually generous benefits and flexible arrangements of the enterprise presented him with a difficult dilemma.

#### INSECURITY INTERPRETED AS IN-WORK POVERTY

Workers individually and collectively reflect on in-work poverty and inadequate remuneration and the lack of a social wage: 'Basically I came to the conclusion that the [formal] jobs weren't worth it. After a while I was looking at the time it took to earn the pittance and I would just come home and get really angry' (Viktor).

'It's humiliating, working for such a salary. It's better to risk not working for a time. I can make up the equivalent to 3 months salary shovelling earth for some rich Muscovite working on a fancy dacha building site. At least they're paying me real money. Then I can rest for a bit, keep my head down' (Dmitry).

'Time isn't money – you can't earn it back. Taxi-driving, I can go at the pace I want. I can work a 24-hour shift, or do a long-trip to Moscow and back and make what I used to earn in a week or more in the factory. At least if I am sitting on my arse in my car I am still my own person. Nobody in my circle looks down on me for not having a permanent wage. It's like the curse from that film: "May you have to live on a salary alone"' (Sasha).

'I don't work for the salary. No one does. Ok, we get a bonus for jobs but without the benefits, like good sick pay and holidays, we'd all be out the door. I admit that our boss is unusual in that [...] he knows how to treat good workers. But even he can't pay us a living wage.' (Georgii)<sup>9</sup>

Informants also reported interpreting formal economy remuneration in ways that clearly linked it to the impossibility of household reproduction (the inability to save income for important long-term goals such as children's education and housing), a short to medium-term calculation of the diminishing purchasing power of staple goods, and the explicit comparison to Soviet-era purchasing power for blue-collar workers more generally. The significance should also not be underestimated of a compact, homogenous social geography that facilitated extended social networks of workers with loose but tangible affinities as unjustly exploited, *hard-working* blue-collars (in explicit contradistinction to educated 'penpushers' or owners of capital). Some socialising that reinforces the sense of identity and dispositions occurs within rituals of hospitality: former and present colleagues meeting in communal spaces and on family plots.<sup>10</sup> However much of the maintenance of networks largely just *happens* – just in passing, in terms of the inevitable, sometimes multiple daily encounters of acquaintances in the focal public spaces of the town (a single market space, a very small number of shops, a single cross-roads where multiple work busses pick up shifts at the same time).

#### INSECURITY UNDERSTOOD AS INDIVIDUALISED AND (SELF-)DISCIPLINING WORK-RELATIONS

Despite ubiquitous reflection on the reality of in-work poverty among workers in Izluchino, by no means was low remuneration the only salient characteristic of informants' dissatisfaction with formal work and their consideration of exits to informal labour. As some of the responses indicate, experiences of formal work led to reflections on the meaning of work in terms of 'being one's own person'. Experiences of formal work were strongly correlated with feelings of shame and a lack of self-esteem as a result of changing work relations, specifically regarding the imperative to self-regulate in contexts where work was already demeaning (due to conditions or pay) and similarly, the micro-level of surveillance from intermediary managers, whether workers resisted or complied with this imperative. Exit to informal work, whether own-account or not, was understood as at least a 'lesser evil' and at best, a transformative experience on personhood.

The response among workers to the increasing individualisation of shop-floor relations must be understood in contrast to Soviet-era practices, incentive and disciplinary practices which were 'personalised' (Morrison 2008: 135) but not 'individualised'. Negotiations and bargaining on issues which materially affected workers, such as bonuses, piece-work rates, overtime and so on, were highly personalised, in that individual brigade leaders and managers exercised a large degree of discretion (Morrison 2008: 139) and, like Burawoy's findings on Hungary, Russian workers exercised some degree of autonomy on the shop-floor. However, the individual workers within a team were not subject to the same surveillance and subordinating imperatives of today's workplace. The piece-rate norms were low and bonuses for completed work were paid as a matter of course (Morrison 2008: 138) regardless of the quality of output varying between individuals. Even good teams often contained below-average workers in terms of productivity, whose individual contribution, or lack of it, was masked by the overall team return. The new imperatives of subordination of all aspects of the production process to constant monitoring by multiple levels of supervisors *beyond* the immediate production unit, and the unrelenting pressure

from such authorities for workers to become flexible and regulate themselves to the *supervisors'* understanding of the imperatives of the production world was now cause of much resentment.

Even in the smallest and tightest-knit of worker teams examined, Georgii's plastic fabricating brigade, the expectation to become subordinated units of production was keenly felt. I witnessed this at first hand during a site visit: an expected delivery of raw materials did not arrive and Georgii's team was then rebuked by the foreman of another team for not immediately setting to a number of routine tasks, such as resetting lathes, cleaning equipment and bringing in raw materials from an outside store – mainly duties that were primarily the responsibility of auxiliary workers. The foreman went to find the shift manager and Georgii's men quickly set about making themselves look busy. When the supervisors returned, an empty delivery truck suddenly arrived and all hands were called on to load it for a customer. Another argument ensued, this time in another team as a worker complained that the loading work meant he had to leave his temperature-critical fabricating work, delaying its completion. Later Georgii discussed the incident:

'They expect us to be everywhere at once and still deliver the product before the deadline. The supervisors are like wasps, they just buzz around and distract you. But if I had complained today, they'd write me up in the report and that would be my bonus gone anyway. [...] It is ridiculous sometimes the lengths they go to to find something for you to do. They can't stand it if you don't look busy. I mean it is the good teams that suffer like this if they work well and finish quickly. They've even tried to give us brooms to sweep out the shop when everyone knows there's no point. The shift-supervisor is a real bastard, in front of everyone he says to us [brigade leaders] can't you use your damned initiative and find something constructive for the team to do [...] The point is the supervisors are just nobodies, they're informants. We're the ones that do the work, they do nothing, just watch us the whole time. They shouldn't be able to talk to us like that: we're a team with status; the boss knows we always do a good job.'

Georgii's frustration was shared by his team. The following day, one of his workers quit because of the incident. He explained to Georgii in far earthier terms that he couldn't be bothered with the hassle anymore.

Similar resentment towards the discourse of the 'subordinate, yet flexible' worker enforced by micro surveillance were expressed by Volodia, recounting experience as a forklift driver at the cement factory:

I can load a lorry with bags of cement like I am stacking matchboxes but it doesn't cut me any slack. I could do it with my eyes closed. But if I'm on a night shift, finish with three hours to go and then have a sleep in the back they act like I'm some kind of thief.

Volodia had left the cement works for the second time after his resistance to being given 'filling-in' duties on top of his fork-lift driving led to him being punished with more unsociable shift hours and enforced (unpaid) leave during a seasonally slack period.

Dmitry had told anyone who would listen about landing a job at the new auto plant in Kaluga. When he quit after only a few months I expected him to encounter at least some social opprobrium from his kith and kin (his work-life was the subject of informant group discussion both in his presence and absence). After all, the wages at the plant were about 30 percent higher than the average in Izluchino, and benefits significant. Dmitry, however, very effectively put across his argument across to his confreres that, as he saw it, no self-respecting *working* person could put up with the *supposedly reflexive, yet regimented*, environment of the car plant. Expecting to be put on the assembly plant straight away, he found that for the first few weeks he was put in with a mainly female team not even unpacking parts, but simply stripping the protective polythene covering from wooden crates. He had 'put up with this', understanding it to be a test of his willingness to subordinate himself to the needs of the plant. However, once he had made it on to the assembly line he found life there no less difficult. 'Those foreigner managers, they stick their nose into every detail of what's going on in the line.'

Dmitry objected to having to continually account for his actions, when, as he saw it, he was just getting on with the job. Ironically, he decided to leave the plant because of an episode where he was subject to scrutiny and rebuke due to his effective 'self-regulation' at work. When on the assembly-line, he shadowed another worker, who quickly showed him the relatively limited repertoire of repetitive tasks on their part of the line – fixing parts of the exhaust system to the underside of the chassis. This task involved repeatedly moving back to a work bench a short distance from the line to select the correct sized fixings for the next section of piping. Dmitry recounted how he had been very surprised at the detailed training sessions he had gone through before starting on the line (including video instruction) despite picking up what to do more quickly from the shadowing. He also found it remarkable to see how much the foreign managers had stressed adhering to the production-line protocol in terms of the very specific ordering of tasks. At the same time, training discourses repeatedly emphasised the importance of initiative and adaptability – the company wanted workers who could 'teach themselves' and work on multiple parts of the line at short notice. Dmitry saw a quick production shortcut in breaking the particular protocol of under-chassis work. A couple of weeks into the assembly line job he began loading his capacious dungarees pockets with the exact number of each bolts he needed for several chassis mountings. He could hold his compressed-air gun in his right hand while selecting by feel in his pocket the correct sized bolt with the other hand. This reduced the number of trips to the work bench, speeding up his work. Dmitry had found a kinaesthetically intuitive short-cut but messed up the accounting and checking procedure – essential to the effective replenishment of the parts to the line by other workers. The telling-off he received when observed by the foreign line manager was mild, but it confirmed what Dmitry already had learned from the initial task he'd been given at the beginning of his work at the plant: shop-floor culture was not actually about being 'reflexive', but subordinating oneself to preconceived notions of orderly enterprising: 'You have to do it their way or it is wrong. Even if you've worked it out yourself and you are

right!’ The relative autonomy under socialism that led to worker-centred ‘fixes’ for specific production problems was perceived to have been lost.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE ON WORK

Soon after this episode, Dmitry left the plant and started using his large MPV to facilitate a variety of own-account work. The context of much of the discussion related above was social meetings between Dmitry and other former-colleagues, some of whom worked at the car plant, others he had worked with at the cement factory. This circle included Viktor, who had briefly worked with Dmitry. Viktor’s present place of work – the unregistered PVC window assembly shop – was one of the social spaces of interaction between these former and present colleagues. This ‘drop-in’ space – connected to manual work but also sociality and leisure – was an important site for the accessing of a shared sense of worker identity. However it was also a key site for practicing cultural repertoires of resistance to formal work, in the form of shared discursive representation of it, and of the embodiment of possibilities for survival outside it. The shop and other social venues such as family plots and the compressed social geography of the public spaces of the town also provided plenty of opportunity for more mundane maintenance of class-embedded social networks that facilitated alternative sources of work outside the formal economy. It was by ‘dropping-in’, that Viktor had found the seasonal assembly work at the shop in the first place. He had kept in touch with an extended network of labourers he had worked with in construction. Through one of these he had come to the shop socially to drink vodka, only to find work their later. In turn Dmitry’s connection to Victor had brought some informal delivery work to the former from the shop.

If the social capital associated with being a one-time colleague or worker’s friend allows access to a circle or network of peers and crucially, shared values and codes relating to the merits of control over labour processes – something resembling a ‘meta-occupational community’ (Van Maanen and Barley 1984) – then the articulation of alternative forms of social reproduction are possible in the ongoing socialisation of individuals and households within such a milieu. Dmitry saw that Viktor was doing all right on his seasonal work and own-account jobs and in turn Viktor picked up and reinforced Dmitry’s interpretation of the unreasonable demands of the car plant on him:

‘It’s not like you’re raw clay, is it? They can’t just keep making you in to whatever they want [...] a normal citizen knows how to do many different things and so won’t lose out’. Viktor then commented on his transition to own-account work: ‘There [at the plant] we had to work more for our money. We couldn’t just work as much as they paid us, it wasn’t enough for them. Now we work just as much as we want. Even if it is for less.’

Another informant Kolya, said of the same topic: ‘You can make the decision yourself [about when and how to work], even if you’re working for someone else [such as in own account plumbing jobs]. He’s paying you for the result, not to do it his way. He should know you’ll do a good job and will let you get on with it.’

## *Discussion and Conclusion*

'Normative' industrial work in Russia, now that it is often not paid well enough to support household reproduction, is no longer seen as 'normal'; for some workers the lack of security *on the job* makes it precarious. 'Security' is understood in a complex way relating to wages allowing more than poverty-level consumption, some degree of autonomy and recognition of status at work, as well a general acknowledgement within enterprises of the dignity of blue-collar work. Most workers' understandings of formal work as insecure relate to their access to mnemonic and lay normative resources that allow comparison, both with the past, and with a putative 'normal' working class existence, to which post-socialist reality does not measure up. Before 1991, an explicit contract existed between the paternalistic, state employer acting as social guarantor and the dependent worker, and a cult of work and strong formal and informal sanctions against parasitism facilitated the normalisation of a corporatized worker who, while lacking an organisational base to challenge the often terrible working conditions and pay under socialism, wielded some power and more significantly, autonomy at the shop-floor level (Alashev 1995) and, due to the ritualised transparent exploitation of labour, were able to develop an immanent critique of their society – the 'negative class consciousness' of workers (Burawoy 1992: 134-5) . Once marketised economic relations and neoliberal reforms were adopted, leading to very significant deterioration in benefits, entitlements and wages for those lucky enough not to be laid off, the very powerful disincentives against rejection of formal work – administrative-legal, stigma and worker-enterprise dependency, became increasingly meaningless. In addition, liberalisation and marketisation have increased the amount of 'work' in the informal economy that is available – however lacking in dignity it may be. Indeed, the generally small-scale informal enterprises encountered in the research are a crucial 'pressure-valve' not only 'in the face of overly excessive barriers in the formal economy' (Andrews et al. 2011: 7), but in providing work and incomes comprising nearly half Russia's GDP. Trends in the diversity of sources of income which in any case were already significant the socialist economy, become even more crucial, whether the 500 roubles (\$15) a landless peasant gets for a day collecting mushrooms for his rich Muscovite neighbour, to the sum ten times that obtained by the moonlighting plumber in fitting out a large flat with central heating. 'Shock therapy' was applied in transforming Russia from a command to a market economy. Despite the twenty years that have passed, the memory of transition is still meaningful in assessing what is 'normal' and what is not. The rapid, as opposed to incremental, erosion of the working-wage and living standards in formal employment, entitlements and benefits means that formal work as insecure is felt acutely. Where nothing in everyday working life is normal anymore, informants are more willing to try out alternative ways of maintaining household reproduction. Formal employment then has many downsides. In Russia, for both historical and contemporary reasons formal work is even less attractive than it is for many in the west.

The model of the neoliberal subject as self-regulating in order to maximise human capital requires personal technologies of monitoring and evaluation. 'Self-esteem' and shame are seen as technologies that assist governmentality and produce more malleable subjectivities (Cruikshank 1993). Being in work in a formal employment setting and drawing a regular wage is a formidably anchoring experience in a person's valuation of self. But judging the labouring self is problematic given the seismic collective-individualised



shift in the structuring of risk from socialist to postsocialist contexts. Once again, a pre-market 'cosmology' (Verdery 1996) or 'mnemonic resources' of the socialist period (Straugh 2007) are still accessible to individuals and households allowing negative comparison of the present with a mythic but meaningful past social contract with labour.<sup>11</sup> Self-esteem for informants increasingly comes to be associated with non-dependence on the derisory returns and formal work, which simultaneously requires subjection of the self to both external and individualised regulative technologies that compare unfavourably with Soviet-era labour discipline.

Therefore the weakness of external and internal governmentality to stop informants frequently telling their employers to 'stuff their jobs' has also to be understood within the specific cultural and social contexts of labour under post socialism. The corporate character of the employer-employee relationship that developed under socialism that led to a significant degree of labour quiescence and dependency (Friebel and Guriev 2000) also resulted in enduring worker identities and social networks. The entire labour force of single towns was often concentrated in a single enterprise – the company town. Enterprises and firms socially embedded themselves in a worker's life through the provision of benefits like shops, garden plots, kindergartens, canteens, transportation. Likewise, workers were socially embedded in their firms as the spaces of work, leisure and social reproduction overlapped and gave rise to shared identities and loyalties, despite the often difficult living conditions in reality. Elizabeth Dunn has characterised these interpersonal social obligations as resulting in 'embedded personhood': self-conscious subjectivities of labour (2004: 162-74). The enterprises within which worker identity was embedded withered after 1991, and with them the infrastructural and social supports for workers that created dependency.

However, while post-socialist workforces shrank to a fraction of their former size, social relationships and work-related identities retained significant meaning. The reliance of Eastern Europeans generally on informal social networks of favours and mutual aid has been much studied (Caldwell 2004, Dunn 2004, Ledeneva 1998, Patino 2008). Established under socialism as a general response to lack, these networks, especially given the insecurity, not only of employment, but of other essential services generally such as healthcare and housing, endure beyond the circumstances of their creation. Thus, as individuals move on to other occupations and lives, they are still able to access support based on what was often a shared *work*-based and place-specific identity. The existence for many households of an extended, often work-related social network is important for understanding the willingness of those in insecure work to risk further economic marginalisation outside formal employment.<sup>12</sup> It is striking that existing institutional frameworks (social support networks) from a previous form of economic organization are shaping outcomes in a more market-oriented economic reality. Arguably these are denser networks than those that exist in the west where people tend to move around more and hence are less rooted into their communities.

The individual, faced with increasing insecurity, may well be a 'designer, juggler and stage director of his or her own biography' (Beck 1997: 95), but the overall performance is dependent on a hidden array of back-stage staff (social capital called upon or latent) and the specific cultural history of the theatre (the spatiotemporal context). The particular reliance on horizontal networks in Russia (Dunn 2004: 119) – i.e. the fact that

mutual aid takes place mainly within one's own socio-economic milieu – indicates that social capital of the marginalised is just that, marginal. But at the same time it indicates the ongoing salience of class as an interpretive category in debates around precarity. If we are to understand insecure workers' agency, then we need to look at identity, for it is in shared identities that we discover the reality of social networks and mutual aid.

## ENDNOTES

1. Dunn traces the less than successful adoption of Taylorist/Fordist production techniques in the Soviet Union and like Burawoy shows how the production bottlenecks and institutional niceties of socialist led to a greater degree of self-management on the shop floor (2004: 9-18). In another chapter Dunn provides a pertinent discussion of neoliberal governmentality applied to post-socialist production. (2004: 94-129).
2. The UN classes Russia as in 'transition': neither a developed nor developing country (2010). In terms of national income per capita, Russia is usually classed as an upper-middle income country (World Bank 2010), which, due to the unequal distribution of its vast natural resources wealth, is a definition of little explanatory value for understanding actually lived experience of most workers.
3. To protect the anonymity of my informants I use a pseudonym for the town. I have also changed individuals' names and obscured some details pertaining to the nature of enterprises.
4. Inevitably, the term blue-collar is a simplification of the variety of manual, semi-skilled and skilled heavy and medium industry jobs available in the Izluchino enterprise, however, despite the valid objections to this term (Spencer 1977) it usefully serves as a heuristic tool in that it captures the main characteristics of much of the normative employment in the district – full-time, production-based subordinate, etc.
5. Due to the construction boom in Moscow some local enterprises have expanded significantly. For a fuller discussion of the changing fortunes of company towns and the role of their 'inherited conditions' after 1991, see Golubchikov 2006.
6. The average district pay was 16000 roubles/month, approximately three quarters of the national average of around 20000 roubles, or \$675/month (Rosstat 2010a). The 'subsistence minimum', or poverty line, for the region was 5400 roubles/month for people of working age in December 2010 (Rosstat 2010b). It is important to stress the large disparity between incomes in Moscow and outside the capital. Comparable blue- and white-collar work in the former is often at least twice as well paid.
7. Over 10 percent of the oblast work-force is employed in Moscow.

8. Lehmann and Ruble (1997) provide a figure of 17 percent female skilled labour employment in their case study of a provincial city. In Izluchino the figure is less than 10 percent.
9. Georgii's employer also offered low-interest loans to all employees, a very unusual situation.
10. C.f. 'bench-work': social interaction on public seating that help shape the classed public spaces in front of apartment housing blocks in Romania (Kideckel 2004: 46).
11. Mnemonic resources do not just refer to individual or shared memory of 'better' working lives under socialism, but may also include physical or spatial elements such as photographs, memorials and soviet era constructions that evoke unfavourable comparison of the present with the past. For example informants often discussed their personal contribution to production in the Soviet era that led to improvements in the standard of living in their town – the construction of infrastructure and housing, for example.
12. Pahl (1980) argues that a work-related identity can be maintained after having left a particular employment especially if the person has particular skills that can be utilised in the alternative economy (in Harding and Jenkins 1989: 24).

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